Liberals slammed for $12M retrofit to Loblaws fridges; McKenna defends deal, touting 'significant emissions reductions'

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Body

Opposition parties are protesting the Liberal government's decision to give $12 million to one of Canada's largest grocery chains to help make its refrigerators better for the environment.

The announcement sparked ridicule and outrage on Parliament Hill, where MPs from both sides of the political spectrum cast the funding agreement with the Loblaws chain as another example of how the Trudeau government favours big corporations and the rich.

Niki Ashton, a New Democrat from northern Manitoba, said the company is owned by one of the wealthiest families in Canada and that the federal government should direct funding for green initiatives to First Nations and other communities with a greater need for support.

Ashton called the funding announcement "peak Liberal" in light of the recent SNC-Lavalin controversy, where the government is accused of pressuring the former attorney general to intervene in a criminal case to favour the Montreal-based global engineering giant.

"It's frankly obscene to see the government doing favours for Loblaws when so many others could - and are desperate to - put those funds to good use," she told the Star on Tuesday.

"Here they are using climate change as an excuse to give their rich friends money they don't need."

Conservative MPs also raised the issue in the House of Commons on Tuesday.

During question period, British Columbia MP Ed Fast said the Loblaw company chalked up billions of dollars in profit last year - revenue totalled $11.2 billion, according to their latest earnings report in February - and quipped that the House Speaker may be able to tell him "how many Canadians can walk into the Prime Minister's Office and ask them to pay for a new fridge?

"Why is it always the wealthy and well-connected that get handouts from these Liberals?" Fast asked.

Environment Minister Catherine McKenna defended the move, announced Monday, which sees Ottawa contribute a quarter of the funding Loblaw says it will dedicate to retrofitting fridges in its 370 stores over the next three years so they use less energy.

She said the chain is receiving federal support because "they can get the most significant emissions reductions" through this program - the equivalent of taking 50,000 cars off the road each year.

"Let's be clear, this project actually is going to make a difference," McKenna said as she left the Liberal cabinet meeting Tuesday. "It's really unfortunate that you have the leaders of the opposition politicizing serious climate action across the board."

The environment minister also disagreed with opposition claims the Liberals only support corporations in the fight against climate change.

She pointed to the carbon tax rebates being sent to people in provinces where the levy was imposed this month, which the government says will outweigh the expected extra costs of gasoline and other products for 80 per cent of residents.

In Ontario, where the Progressive Conservative government has railed against what it calls a "job-killing carbon tax," a household of four will get a $307 carbon tax rebate this year.

Loblaw is also one of 54 recipients chosen by officials in the environment department for the federal government's "low carbon economy challenge."

The initiative includes $450 million for businesses, municipalities, Indigenous groups, not-for-profits and provinces and territories that apply for federal help with climate change initiatives.

The idea is to "leverage" federal support with initiatives that reduce greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to climate change.

In an emailed statement, Loblaw Companies Ltd. spokesperson Catherine Thomas said the grocery chain plans to spend $36 million to reduce emissions from its fridges and repeated McKenna's claim that this will be akin to taking 50,000 cars off the road.

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